

Together Forever by Ryomou

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Summary: On the first day of Kindergarten, Will Byers decides that he's going to marry Mike Wheeler.

1. Chapter 1

It's hot the day that Will Byers first realizes that he might be different. He will remember this more vividly than anything else once he becomes a man. Sweat tickles the nape of his neck and pools into the bends of his knees as he gently rocks back and forth, back and forth, on the child-sized swings. His palms are wet as he grips the metal chains on either side of him. Everybody is small, but he's still smaller, his feet barely touching the ground, even though he's on the lowest swing. The tips of his toes drag on the loose gravel of the playground, dirtying his shoes. He likes watching them turn from white to dusty gray.

Will wants to play with other kids, but he's afraid, because he doesn't know anybody. He didn't go to Pre-School and he hasn't been to a daycare since Jonathan turned eight. So, he sits here, and hopes that some group will need another person for a game and come and get him. Or maybe somebody will want to swing too and want to swing with *him* and then he'll have his *own* friend.

And that's exactly what happens, in its own way.

One minute Will's looking out at the sprawling playground, wishing more than anything to be a part of it, and the next, he's got company. A boy, taller than him, dressed in a brand new shirt, and tan pants, hair blacker than the night sky and cut kind of crooked—as if he couldn't hold still long enough for the hairdresser to do it properly. He doesn't introduce himself, but what he does say is better.

"Do you wanna be my friend?"

Will smiles—smiles so big and so hard his cheeks hurt, because, yes, this is what he wants more than anything in the world!

"Yeah," Will says with a laugh, and his new friend smiles too, just as big, all teeth and freckled skin and baby cheeks.

That's when Will feels it, a pull, just behind his heart, flowing all the way down to his stomach. Like he swallowed butterflies made of fire and sunshine.

"I'm Mike," his friend says, holding his hand out, oh so official.

"Will," he gets in return. When they shake, both of their hands are sweaty, but Will doesn't mind. He just asks, "Do you want to swing with me?"

And Mike does! Because they're friends now, and like friends do, they talk about everything; how Will's brother is a year older than Mike's sister, their favorite toys, their favorite comics, though Will's collection's bigger, because he can actually read more than just the strips. Eventually, they have to go inside, and they sit next to each other there too, during story time, and art time, and playtime. And somewhere between Mike telling Will that he likes his drawing of a rocket ship and Will being amazed that Mike doesn't need use his fingers to count, William Byers decides that he's going to marry Michael Wheeler.

It's perfect in his five-year-old mind. He and Mike would live in the castle he's always drawing at home. And they'd have a great big TV, an actual *color* TV, and there would be a blanket fort, and no bedtime ever and they'd be together, just him and Mike, always. Just him, and Mike, and all the butterflies in his tummy.

When he shares his idea, Mike wholeheartedly agrees; and they spend the rest of class planning a wedding in space, with five different kinds of cake, mashed potatoes, and Mike's mom's lasagna. It'll be on Halloween and everyone will wear costumes and eat candy before dinner. Everybody that shows up gets a puppy. It's perfect.

"It's perfect," he squeals at Jonathan, after nearly fifteen solid minutes of chatter about his day; starting with the swings and ending with marrying Mike in space and moving to Castle Byers. Jonathan had picked him up at the front doors and is slowly walking him home. Slowly, because every time Will gets excited, he needs Jonathan to look at him, to watch him bounce up and down and emphasize by flailing his arms this way and that. Jonathan does this with a bemused smile, because even if he's ten, and way too cool to be hanging around his little brother, he really does care about him. He isn't smiling now though, not after this story, and with the bluntness that only a child can possess, Jonathan says,

"You can't marry a boy, Will."

Will stops, a little hurt, but mostly just confused. That doesn't make sense. People marry boys all the time. Even his mom married a boy. So, why can't he?

"Why?"

"You just can't."

Jonathan puts a hand between Will's shoulder blades and guides him forwards so that they're walking again.

"But why?" Will persists.

"You just can't, Will!"

Jonathan wants his little brother to be quiet. There are other kids walking—grown-ups, too. Someone might hear. Will stomps a foot and lets out a high pitched sound of frustration, and though he counts the number of tantrums his brother's thrown on one hand, Jonathan can feel this one coming a mile away.

"Okay, okay, wait." He turns Will to face him, kneeling on the ground so that their eye to eye. "Look, boys aren't supposed to like other boys. Boys are supposed to like girls."

"What?! But I like MIKE!" Will practically wails, tears welling up in his huge eyes. Will hadn't even talked to any girls today. Why would he want to marry one when he had a friend that was so much better? Plus, Mike liked comics!

"I know you like Mike," Jonathan soothes. "You can be friends with Mike. Nobody's saying you can't. You just can't *marry* Mike, Will. It's against the *law*."

"That's stupid! The law's *stupid*! Who says...W-Who says..." Will's hiccuping now, working himself up into a fit, tears starting to stream down his cheeks, and Jonathan prays, actually *prays*, even though he only goes to church once a year, that his brother is just confused, because Will's known this kid Mike for all of four hours, and has no idea about the birds and the bees or *life* and Jonathan is NOT about to teach him.

"Hey, hey, now," he strokes Will's hair like their Mom does when her boys are sick, "it's okay, Will, I promise. Hey, listen," he holds his brother's face in his hands. "you can like Mike all you want, okay? But you know why you can't get married?"

"Why?" Will snuffles.

"Because you're five. The law says you're too little. Gotta wait 'til you're a bit older, okay?" And Jonathan smiles his big brother smile, hoping that it gets rid of the hurt.

"Oh."

Will sticks his lower lip out in a stupid pout and Jonathan can't help but laugh, because he looks ridiculous, cheeks mushed between his hands, eyes watery, skin blotchy red.

"Well, how long do I have to wait?" Will asks.

"Mmm," Jonathan hums, squinting his face up, "until you're about eighteen."

Will groans dramatically and Jonathan ruffles his hair, playful this time, hoping that the worst has passed. That this is just a phase, a misunderstanding.

"So, do I get to see that rocket ship you made?" Jonathan asks, changing the subject as quickly as possible.

"No, I gave it to Mike."

"Of course you did."

"He said it was the BEST ship he'd ever seen! He's gonna put it on his wall and everything!"

At the end of the day, William Byers still wants to marry Michael Wheeler, but the saying *boys aren't supposed to like other boys* lingers for a long time.

2. Chapter 2

"Hey, Jonathan?" Will whispers into the dark, hoping for an answer but dreading it all the same.

"Yeah?" His brother whispers back.

It's the weekend after Will's ninth birthday, and Jonathan's sleeping on the floor next to the bed, mostly because it makes Will feel safe, but also kind of because Jonathan's afraid to be alone. Their parents have been raging for hours in what's probably their worst fight yet. Sometimes a silence falls over the house, a hush so quiet it's almost louder than the yelling itself. Then, Lonnie opens his mouth again, and everything's back to square one.

"What's a fag?" Will asks.

Jonathan sighs in *that way*, the way that says he wishes he could give a nice answer, but there either isn't one, or he doesn't know how.

"You're not a fag Will. I know what Dad says but...you're not a fag, okay?"

"Okay...but what is it?"

Will hears Jonathan roll onto his back.

"It's...it's a really bad word for someone that's queer. But...umm...queer's not nice either, I guess."

"What does it all mean though, Jonathan?"

"They're just...bad words for guys that...you know...like other guys."

"Oh."

Will has to think for a moment.

There was a time, back when he was five and just starting Kindergarten, when he had boldly proclaimed to Jonathan that he had made a new friend, and one day they were going to get married.

Of course, that friend had been Mike, and neither one of them knew what getting married actually meant; just that you ate cake and got to live together for the rest of your lives. Jonathan had been ten, and blunt in a way that only a ten-year-old could be when he told Will that boys could only marry girls. And when Will had asked why he just got a brisk, "boys just aren't supposed to like other boys."

Will had cried on and off again for two whole hours, thinking that Jonathan meant that Mike and Will couldn't be friends anymore because they were both boys.

But after ice cream and the clarification that boys just couldn't *marry each other but could be friends forever I promise please stop*, the saying never left him. Not really pressing but rather lingering just a little bit in the back of his mind.

"Boys aren't supposed to like other boys," Will repeats now.

"Yeah," Jonathan mutters.

Will's more than old enough to understand the difference between like and *like*. His new friend Dustin likes Lisa Donovan because she shares her snacks sometimes, but he *likes* Sarah Anderson. Will has no idea why. Something about her hair, maybe. So, boys can like boys as friends, but it's wrong to like one more than that. You can't have a crush on a boy. And he doesn't. Will doesn't have a crush on a boy. At least he doesn't think he does. He doesn't exactly have anything to compare his feelings to, because he's never had a crush on a girl either. Maybe.

"Jonathan, how do you know if you have a crush on somebody?"

Jonathan scoffs into the darkness.

"If you have to ask, then you don't, Will."

Will's not so sure.

"Well, just...what does it feel like?"

The room is quiet for so long, Will almost thinks that Jonathan's gone to sleep, but then he hums thoughtfully and starts to speak again.

"I was just a little bit younger than you when I had my first crush, I think. Her name was Brenda Sipes. She had this really long, blonde hair that she used to always wear in a braid, and she wore the same yellow dress a lot. She got made fun of for it, but I thought it looked nice, you know?" Jonathan sighs and eases himself up on one elbow so he can look up at his brother in the dark. "The thing about crushes, Will, is that they're kind of stupid. They don't make a lot of sense. I didn't know Brenda. We weren't friends. But every time I saw her, my heart would start beating so fast and my stomach would feel just...sick...like I ate a bunch of—"

"Butterflies," Will interrupts.

"Yeah," Jonathan laughs, "yeah, like butterflies. And I'd always try to stand next her in the lunch line and stuff and I'd just get so *nervous* that she'd notice me even though that was exactly what I wanted. It's like, all I could think about was Brenda all the time. It...honestly, it was kind of awful. I got really bad grades that year."

"So, what happened?" Will asks.

"Hmm?"

"With Brenda?"

"Oh, I told her I liked her on the last day of school. And she told me that I was dumb and I smelled bad. But she ended up moving away before we started middle school so it doesn't matter."

"I...That's...I don't think you smell bad," Will finally says, because what can he do to make something better when it happened such a long time ago?

Jonathan chuckles softly.

"Thanks, Will. But does that answer your question?"

Will nods his head, because, yeah, he's pretty sure it does.

Butterflies and sweaty palms.

His heart pounding like he just raced Dustin a hundred miles on his

bike.

Wanting to be *seen* but wanting to be invisible.

The weightless feeling of falling too far too fast just from the sound of a laugh—the sound of Mike's laugh.

It had been that weightlessness and those butterflies that had started the argument between his parents in the first place. Earlier this evening, Mike had dropped by, dark hair windswept and chest heaving like he had been peddling his bike in a ghost race with himself.

"I have a present for you," he'd said. And Will's heart had soared.

"But, you already gave me a present."

And he had. The best present. D&D figurines, fresh and unpainted, ready for a new campaign.

"Nah, that was from my mom. This is just from me. You know, from my allowance."

And out of his backpack, Mike pulled a fresh sketchbook. It was hardcovered and spiralbound—finer than anything Will had ever owned. On the inner cover, scribbled in Mike's messy penmanship were the words *'for the adventures of Will the Wise.'*

Mike shuffled his feet.

"I thought you could put all your drawings in it."

Will had never owned a real sketchbook. He had drawn on children's paper and lined paper and scratch paper, but never real art paper. And in the moment, he was so lost for words, he did the only thing he could think of; he pulled his best friend in for a hug.

It wasn't the first time he'd hugged Mike, but it seemed like the first time that truly mattered. His heart felt like it was somewhere down around his feet and his head felt full of air, and when Mike's arms reached up to hug him back, a tiny part of him wished that the moment could last forever.

Until Lonnie opened up the door, beer in hand, and screamed Mike right off the porch while yanking Will inside by his forearm.

The seconds after that stretched on for hours—a barrage of questions and shouting and words Will had never heard before; words like "fag" and "homo," until Joyce came in like a mother bear, ready to rage until the bitter end.

Here, in the middle of the night, lying awake with his brother, with stories of crushes still fresh in his brain and the feeling of Mike still fresh in his arms Will has to wonder...

"Jonathan..."

"Oh my God, Will, *what?*"

"If...if I were...a fag...would you still love me?"

Jonathan sits up as if he heard a gunshot.

Even in the darkness, Will can tell Jonathan's mind is moving a thousand miles a minute. There are most likely a million things he wants to say, and twice as many things he wants to ask.

Instead, he reaches a hand out and pats his little brother on the arm.

"Will," he says, so softly that it can barely be heard over the sound of their parents, "I will *always* love you, okay? No matter what. Don't you ever forget that."

Will Byers feels five years old again as he asks, "Promise?"

"Promise."

3. Chapter 3

Will never hated the fact that Mike's room was on the second floor more than he did right at this moment. It's late, and it's humid, and his arm is tired from throwing pebbles—none of which came even remotely close to the window he was using as a target. There's a reason Will Byers is always picked last in gym class; athletics are not his strong suit. He throws his last stone with an angry grunt that sounds more like a miserable sigh. The stupid thing hits closer to Nancy's window than it does Mike's.

"C'mon..."

"I was wondering what that sound was," Mike says from the front door.

Will's shout of surprise gets caught in his throat.

"God, Mike! You scared me!"

Mike laughs, and even through his distress, it warms the young Byers' heart. His friend's hair isn't done, fluffed up in poofy curls around his head, and he's swimming in pajamas a few sizes too big for him, just the way he likes. "For optimal comfort," he always says.

"It's almost midnight, what are you doing out here? Did you sneak out? "

Oh, right.

"I just..." Will tries to think of way to say, 'I need someone to talk to right now,' without sounding needy. And just like that, his eyes are wet with the tears he's been trying not to shed all day, and through the dozens of feet between them, Mike must be able to see it, because he's right there, crossing the lawn in his bare feet.

"Will, what's wrong?"

A gentle arm is slung across his shoulders right as the dam breaks, and his tears turn into great heaving sobs, right there on the Wheeler's front lawn.

"Hey, hey..." Mike soothes, drawing Will in for a hug, pressing his face into his shoulder as he rests one hand carefully on the back of his head. He's still so much smaller than him, smaller than everyone, and right now Mike feels like the biggest most important person in the world. "Come on," Mike pulls his face away from his shirt and rubs the tears of his cheeks with the palms of his hands. "Let's go to the basement. We can talk there."

"But...my bike," Will, sobs, suddenly worried about leaving his bike in the middle of the drive, even though he's done it a hundred times before. Mike is unperturbed.

"It's okay. It's fine. Come one."

He guides Will into the house by the hand, something they haven't done since they were seven, motioning for him to stay quiet. They tiptoe their way through the house, Mike leading them on a detour through the kitchen for snacks, before making their way down the stairs. Even though it's probably safe once the basement door is closed, they don't seem to breathe until their tucked safely into Mike's blanket fort, an unnecessary flashlight wedged between them.

"Now," Mike starts, passing Will a Coke "what's going on?"

The can is cool in Will's hand, drops of condensation building on the outside of the aluminum. He doesn't look at Mike.

"My parents are getting a divorce," he says.

"What? Why?"

He wants to say *because of me* but figures that would be too hard to explain, so he settles with, "They've been fighting a lot."

Mike seems to have a thought then, because his face goes eerily blank before he erupts into a fit of questions.

"Oh my God, you're moving, aren't you? Your Mom's leaving and taking you with her. Or your Dad. Is that it? Where is it?! Is it far?! Have you told anyone else? We just started our campaign. Oh my God, what are we gonna tell Dustin? And Lucas!"

Will feels his eyes getting wider and wider with every word that comes out of Mike's mouth. And Mike is working himself up into a frenzy, cheeks getting pink from the stress of his frantic rambling.

"Mike, I'm not moving," the statement calms his friend immediately.

"You're not?"

"No."

"Oh. But then, why are you so sad? I mean! Not that divorce isn't sad! But your dad...he can be kind of mean, can't he?"

That stings. Mike always has this very unfortunate way of being a bit on the wrong side of blunt. Yeah, Will's dad is mean. He drinks too much, he swears too much, he forces Will into different clothes, sports, movies, and music in order to make him into more of a *man*. What Mike doesn't understand is that Will isn't mad about any of that, because if he were just normal, his dad wouldn't have to do it in the first place.

"I..." but Will can't say that. He puts his drink down to twist his fingers in the hem of his untucked shirt.

"Will," Mike's looking at him earnestly, eyes big and round with concern, face so soft and so caring. "you know you can tell me anything, right?"

Will looks down at his lap.

"They're getting divorced because of me, Mike."

"What?"

"They keep fighting...they never stop fighting...about me. It wasn't so bad when I was little, but the older I get the worse it gets, and the more they fight, and I've tried fixing it, but I just can't, Mike," Will finishes with a snuffle.

"Why would they fight about you? You're...you're *you*."

There's a bundle of emotions burning in the center of Will's chest.

Pain, and loneliness, and fear, and underneath—a deep affection for the sweet and simple way his friend sees him. He's not bad to Mike, not something to be changed. Just Will. Unathletic, short, skinny, nerdy, Will. And Mike likes him that way.

And that might all change right now.

Jonathan says he's too young to know for sure, but Will knows, has always known, knows it the same way he knows that grass is green, and the sky is blue, and the ocean is deep.

"I'm different, Mike. And my dad...he hates it. He hates *me*. And Mom hates *him* for hating *me*."

Mike cocks his head to the side, as if listening for something far away.

"What do you mean different?"

Will wracks his brain for the easiest way to explain this to his friend.

"You know how Kathy started wearing a bra this year and it was the only thing everyone talked about for like a month?"

Mike laughs, head bobbing along with the sound of it.

"Yeah, she's pretty hot now."

"See..." Will hesitates. "I don't think so."

"So, you think you're different because you don't think Kathy's hot now that she has boobs? You're not the only one. Some people wanna just stay in and play some D&D, there's nothing wrong with that. We're gonna have the rest of our lives to like girls."

Will sighs in frustration, though he can't help but find Mike's line of thinking incredibly sweet. Some kids in their class are hitting puberty harder than others, and some aren't hitting it at all, and he probably assumes Will's a few years shy of liking girls and seems ready to defend that until the end.

"No, I'm...Mike, you're my best friend."

"You're my best friend, too."

"And as my best friend I'm trusting you. I mean, *really* trusting you."

"That's what friends are for."

"Mike...I don't like girls."

Nothing. Mike just stares at him. Nodding. Will feels ready to throw up.

"Okay...? Is that it?" Mike asks. "What does this have to do with your parents?"

A flash of anger races up the smaller boy's spine.

"Mike. I don't *like* girls."

"You said that."

Will Byers has never hit anybody in his life, but right now, for all that he loves him, he feels like he might be able to hit Mike Wheeler.

"I like boys!" Will explodes, anger blazing hot. "I don't like girls because I like boys! Our fieldtrip to the zoo and Lucas is freaking out the whole time wondering if Tina is going to hold is hand and I'm sitting in the back of the bus wishing that stupid Matt would just turn around and *notice me*, let alone hold my hand! I'm what everyone says I am! I'm a fag! And my whole family knows, and my dad hates me because of it, and my parents are divorcing because of it, and I've tried everything I can think of to change it, but nothing works! I've tried thinking of girls, dancing with girls, holding hands with girls. I went to church. I prayed—" Will's crying again, great heaving sobs. "I just want to be like everyone else and I keep trying but I can't, Mike, I can't, and now Dad's leaving and it's my fault."

Will's crying so hard it hurts. It hurts his stomach and his eyes and his head and his heart. They're words he's been dying to get out for so long, words he's been too scared to tell anybody, even Jonathan, who promised to love him no matter what. There's no weight lifted off his shoulders, no clarity in his mind. It feels like he's suspended in time, drowning in his own sorrow, waiting for Mike to...what? Push him

away in disgust? Tell him to get out? Pull out the walkie and immediately call Dustin—to laugh at what Will is? He feels like he knows Mike better than all that, but then again, once upon a time, he thought he knew his father too.

It turns out he's right though, he does know Mike better than that. Two warm arms wrap around him and rock him like his mother might if she were the one to see him so upset. Will flings his arms around his friend and hugs him back tight, burying his face in his hair.

"Your dad's a piece of shit," Mike whispers. "There's nothing wrong with you, Will."

Will shakes his head because *there is*, there is something wrong with him, and everyone can see it.

"No," Mike insists. "There is *nothing* wrong with you. None of this is your fault. It's his fault. Do you hear me?"

Will keeps shaking his head, not fully understanding Mike's words, because they don't make sense—not to him.

"Stop, stop," Mike orders, squeezing him tighter. Will obeys. "Nod if you can hear me."

Will nods.

Mike slowly pulls his arms away and grabs Will's face in his hands. Out of the corner of his eye Will can see the mess of tears, spit and snot he's left behind all over Mike's shoulder and in his hair. Gross.

"Listen to me. You're never going to call yourself that again."

"W-what?" Will's voice sounds weak and broken.

"A fag. I *never* want to hear you call yourself that again. You're *Will Byers*. So what if you like boys? I don't care. The guys won't care. Anyone that loves you won't care. And your parent's divorce is just that—*theirs*. Their problem. Not yours."

Mike shocks the hell out of Will by pressing a chaste kiss to his

forehead. It's like flipping a switch. Will's heart speeds up in his chest, his palms get clammy, his face gets red. He'd tried to push his crush on Mike off on Matt McGrady, who had similar dark hair and freckles, but lacked his friend's toothy grin and gangly limbs. In the back of his mind Will curses a year's worth of hard word undone.

"Don't hurt yourself like this, Will. You're great just the way you are."

They sit there, Will's face still in Mike's hands, staring at each other. Mike's probably looking for answers, and Will doesn't know if he'll find them because he's spinning after everything he's just been told. His brother loves him, his mom loves him, his friends love him.

"Understand?" Mike finally asks.

Will nods.

He is loved.

He might be different, but he is loved.

4. Chapter 4

"The Snowball is such bullshit."

It's been Dustin's mantra since they first announced the dance in late November. They're all 11 now, and the curly haired boy has asked every girl from Sarah Johnson to Emily Fitzgibbon without the slightest bit of luck.

"I'm telling you, Will, it's these stupid, goddamn teeth."

"Your teeth are fine," Will assures. "You said yourself they're coming in."

"Yeah, but I need them to come in now, or I'll never get a date for this stupid dance."

"So, what?"

"What do you mean so what?"

"I mean, it's just a dance, right? There are like five every year. You've got plenty of time."

"Yeah," Dustin sighs, exasperated, "but this is the *Snowball*. The big one. It's like prom for middle school."

Dustin flops on the couch next to Will, hat askew on his head. They're at his house for once; his Mom's at work, Jonathan's at work, and for a rare moment it's just the two of them. Lately, Mike and Lucas have been spending a lot of time together, bonding over Star Wars and the fact that their homes are nearly side by side. Will and Dustin can't quite match it, and while they're still a party in every sense of the word, at times, they still end up separated, and it can get a little lonely.

"I bet that son-of-a-bitch Lucas has a date," Dustin fumes.

"Kathy," Will confirms.

"Kathy with the tits?!"

"Mhm."

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

Will knows that coming out to Mike didn't change things. They're still friends—good friends. But spending less time with him hurts, and not just because of his stupid crush. In a selfish way, he misses being the most important person in Mike's life. He misses late night phone calls, and Mike jumping through his bedroom window to avoid his dad. He misses sleepovers in the blanket fort, just the two of them, and Mike sacrificing his favorite pizza in favor of Will's. All the stupid things that made him fall for him in the first place.

"What about you?" Dustin asks.

"What about me?"

"You thinking about asking anyone to the dance?"

Will shrugs his shoulders.

"Nah," he answers.

"Is it 'cause of Mike?"

The smaller boy feels his face scrunch up.

"What does me asking someone to the dance have to do with Mike?"

"I mean, you like him right?"

The way Will's blood runs cold could be compared to being dunked in ice.

"I-I don't—"

His stomach drops like being on a rollercoaster and he leans forward to fight off the nausea. Did Mike tell? He wouldn't do that would he? Will's heart is racing in his chest and he's suddenly developed a stutter and can't seem to stop.

"W-why, I-I I w-wouldn't—"

Dustin sits up and goes to put a hand on his back.

"Hey—"

In an act that shocks both of them, Will slaps his hand out of the air.

"Get out." His voice is firm. Tears are suddenly threatening to spill over his cheeks that are splotched red in embarrassment, but his voice is firm. He stands up. "Get out of my house. Go home."

Mike had to have told. Will's been so careful about keeping his feelings a secret. Sure, people tease him about being queer, but Mike's the only person he's told, and he's told absolutely *nobody* about his crush on *Mike*. Which means Mike must have figured it out on his own and told Dustin, and what if Dustin told Lucas? What if that's why Mike and Lucas spend so much time together now? What if Mike's freaked out and doesn't want Will around anymore? It's one thing to have a friend that's queer, it's another to have that same friend like you.

"Whoa. Will. I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. I just assumed—"

Assumed?

"Assumed?! Mike didn't tell you?"

"*Mike* didn't tell me?" Dustin parrots. "Tell me what?"

Will and Dustin stare at each other for a long time, Will full of heated and heartbroken suspicion, and Dustin full of innocent confusion. Will taps himself on the chest.

"That I'm...you know...that I don't like girls," Will finishes lamely.

"First of all, no, and second of all, what the hell, you tell Mike, but you don't tell me?" Dustin asks, offended.

"Well, apparently, you already know!"

"So! I still like to be told things!"

Silence hangs heavy in the air for a moment before Dustin pats the

couch beside him.

"Sit, I'm not gonna tell anyone, I promise."

Will hesitates.

"Will. Friends don't lie."

Just like that, all the fight goes out of the smaller boy, because his friend is right. It's been their pact from the beginning—and if he can't believe in that, then he can't believe in anything. He sighs and flops on the couch, boneless and suddenly tired from his rush of adrenaline.

"Look, I didn't mean to upset you," the curly haired boy starts, "I've just seen the way you are around him. Mike, I mean."

"Oh my God," Will covers his face with his hands.

Dustin's smart, but sometimes has the tendency to be oblivious. If he's noticed he has a crush on Mike, who else has?

"Don't worry, I know what you're thinking. I don't think anyone else has noticed. *I* didn't notice until he started spending more time with Lucas, you know? But like, how you two sometimes still share a sleeping bag or a bike, or how you still have all of Mike's shitty drawings and campaign ideas hung up in your room, or how the two of you lift the arm between your seats at the movies...stuff like that... it's different. I never payed attention before, but then Lucas was there, and I noticed."

Will hadn't even payed attention to any of that. They're so engrained into his daily life that he had taken them for granted. His heart is plastered along Mike's wall along with all of his drawings dating back to Kindergarten, his soul housed between a blanket fort and Castle Byers and an extra cheese pizza split between two best friends.

Will chuckles, and it sounds a little bit sad even to his ears.

"When we were five, we were gonna get married."

"You were *what* now?"

"Me and Mike. We met and Kindergarten. And we used to talk about getting married. I've liked him since I was five, Dustin."

Dustin stares at him, toothless mouth wide open, brain clearly going full speed as he processes the information.

"Does Mike like boys too?!"

Will shakes his head.

"I don't think so. We were little then and didn't really know what married meant. And when I told him about me, he definitely liked girls. He doesn't mind me being..." Will sighs, because Mike gets mad when Will calls himself a queer or a fag, "...me...but he's not like me either."

"So...what are you gonna do about it?"

"Do about it?" Will asks incredulously.

"Yeah, are you gonna tell him?"

"Are you out of your *mind*? No! No, I'm not gonna tell him!"

"Well, are you gonna try to find someone to go to the Snow Ball with?"

"It's not that easy, Dustin! If you haven't heard, being queer isn't exactly normal."

"What are you going to do then, just be alone for the rest of your life?"

Will shrugs.

"I mean, I guess."

"That's sad, Will." Dustin says.

They sit there quietly for a moment.

"You know what!" The curly haired boy declares with sudden fervor.

"What?"

"We may not get dates to the stupid dance, but dammit, Will Byers, we're gonna find you a boyfriend."

"I...Dustin...no."

"It doesn't have to be *now*. I don't expect to find a girlfriend right now. But, there are other people like you out there, you know. And we're gonna find them! Maybe it'll be in high school, or in college, or when we're grown up. But you're not going to spend forever alone, Will. You're too good for that."

Dustin scoots in closer and throws an arm around Will's shoulders.

"Just call me Wing-Man Dustin. You may not find love with Mike, but dammit, if it's out there I'm gonna find it."

Will covers his face with his hands again.

"Oh my God."

5. Chapter 5

For as nerdy as he is, Lucas is kind of a traditionalist. His grandfather served in the early years of the Vietnam War, and his family are all firm American patriots with an affinity for speaking their minds—hence Erica. So, out of all of Will's friends, Lucas takes Will's coming out the worst.

It kind of happens on accident, just like *every single* coming out has been up to this point. Will is fresh out of the Upside Down, barely a month back into the real world, and the Christmas season is bearing down on all of them, heavy and bright. Normally, Will loves Christmas. He loves the lights and the presents and food and the snow. But now, he can barely stand any of it.

Every night, his dreams are plagued by nightmares—memories of darkness and the eerie chittering of the Demogorgon as he hides in any place he can cram his body into. He wakes like clockwork around one in the morning, sweaty and heart pounding in his chest, uncertain of where he is or whether he needs to hide again, terrified that the cold of winter is the cold of *there*, and his life revolves around a nightlight plugged into the corner of his room that he hasn't had to use since he was six.

Mike has changed too. When Will woke up in the hospital, his friends were ecstatic to tell him about Hawkins lab and the adventure they'd had; all about the girl with shaved head that could move things with her mind that had saved not just him, but all of them. Except, Will notices, Mike doesn't talk about her much. Doesn't, or can't. While Dustin regales him with a tale of her throwing a van over their heads '*with her mind, Will*', Mike stands in the background, eyes fixed on the wall on the far side of the room, looking a thousand miles away.

'*She's gone now*,' they say. And his dark-haired friend looks heartbroken in a way that Will has never seen. It's not in a tearful way, or a bitter way, but a genuinely mournful way that seems to go from his eyes all the way down to his soul. His hurt is so deep that it hurts Will too, and a part of him wishes that he could go back into the Upside Down if it meant that Mike could have Eleven back,

because she must have been really special to earn that kind of look in so little time.

So, with that—with Will's nightmares, and Mike's mourning, and Will's mom hovering two feet away from him at all times with the fear that she'll lose him again, Christmas this year just doesn't feel right. It's almost like Will's been disconnected, like he's living outside of his body, but he doesn't know how to put that into words. Jonathan notices though.

"When's the last time you played D&D with your friends?" he asks one morning after breakfast. It's getting close to Christmas Eve and holiday music is playing on the radio. Their house is finally starting to look normal again. Rather than forty strings of lights hung haphazardly all over the living room and hallway, they've just got a few along the ceiling as traditional decoration. It's much better. Will likes it.

"Not since before," Will answers, dropping his plate in the sink and reaching for the kitchen sponge.

"Well," Jonathan continues, shooing Will out of the way to wash the dishes himself. "why don't you call Mike and your friends and go over today. I'll drive you."

Will stares for a second.

"No Mom?"

Jonathan laughs.

"No Mom, I promise."

"And I can stay by myself."

"And you can stay by yourself."

Will literally runs to the phone even though it's only six feet away.

Mike agrees to meet at noon, sounding happier than he has in weeks, because this will be the first time Will has come over like he used to

since everything happened. Jonathan's fine with noon too, under the condition that his little brother take a shower first because, "Seriously Will, you reek."

Will sprints to the shower too.

It might not be the best campaign they've ever created, but in Mike's basement with his party, it might as well be. This, above all other things, was what Will needed. He needed to disappear into Will the Wise, raise the undead, save villagers, all side-by-side with his closest friends. And when their victory was secure eight hours later, they cheered and hugged, like they always had in the old days—if one could count a little over a month as 'the old days.'

Jonathan's not due to pick him up until nine, so they have time to kill, telling jokes and eating junk food and making plans for the next weekend. Dustin's talking about how he's positive he's getting an Atari for Christmas when Mrs. Wheeler calls down that she's got a fresh batch of cookies upstairs, and they all surge for the door like their lives depend on it. Out of everyone's parents, Mrs. Wheeler is the best cook, and definitely the best cookie maker.

She's got small saucers with four cookies for each boy on the counter, and Will feels a bit unsettled looking at them. For some reason it reminds him of the first time he came to the Wheeler's house. Back then, especially compared to his own home, the Wheeler house felt like a palace. Everything was shiny and clean and new, and their plates were fine china with no scratches or chips in them. The Wheeler's and the Byers's were polar opposites, almost like reality and the Upside Down. Their house was three stories with soft, plush carpeting. Will's was a single story, with faded wallpaper and paneling, with a raggedy carpet that was starting to pull up in places. Even at five, Will had felt that just by stepping in there, he would somehow ruin everything. He feels a little bit of that now—like if he reaches out to grab the saucer he might drop it on the ground and shatter it. He knows that if he did, Mrs. Wheeler wouldn't be mad, but it bothers him all the same.

He's grateful that Dustin chooses to start shoving cookies in his mouth then and there, because the other boys follow his lead and start eating at the counter. Dustin suddenly grins, mouth full of

chocolate goo, and points to the doorway between the kitchen and living room. Hanging high on the trim is the traditional holiday mistletoe. Will rolls his eyes, assuming that his friend is excited at the opportunity to catch Nancy underneath it.

Apparently, he's wrong though, because Dustin nudges him again, this time with the sharp end of his elbow, which draws a startled sound of pain out of Will. Dustin winks at him and glances at Mike.

Oh.

Oh, no.

Will is shaking his head and mouthing "no, no, no," silently over and over while Dustin nods enthusiastically.

"What the hell are you two doing?" Lucas asks, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Lucas! Language!" Mrs. Wheeler scolds at the same time Dustin and Will yelp,

"Nothing!"

"Will, sweetheart," Mrs. Wheeler gently puts a hand on the back of Will's head, gently running her manicured nails through his hair. "you've hardly touched your food, are you feeling okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Mrs. Wheeler," Will assures. "I've just eaten a lot today." Kind of a lie, but Will can't exactly say he has a harder time stomaching food since he's made his way back from the Upside Down. Things don't taste as good. Still *good*. But not *as good*. Almost as though some of his taste buds have gone missing.

Mike saves him from his mom's concerned stare.

"C'mon guys, lets go plan for next week!"

And just like that their herding down the stairs again, everybody's cookies demolished except for Will's.

They're barely in the basement when Lucas speaks up.

"What was that about?"

Dustin feigns ignorance.

"What Mike's mom? She's always like that. Remember the meatloaf?"

"No, not *that*—you and Will."

Will wishes he could speak up and say Dustin wants to kiss Nancy under the mistletoe, but he's always been a terrible liar, they'd all be able to tell before he got the lie out. Any lie beyond 'I'm tired,' or 'I don't feel good' or some variation of the sort—it's not an option.

"I'm trying to get Will to kiss Nancy under the mistletoe," Dustin lies instead.

Will swears he's having a heart attack.

"You're *what*?" Mike squeals.

Lucas doesn't say anything at all, just stares at the two of them with suspicion.

"Uh-huh. And what does that have to do with Mike?"

Dustin just keeps the lie going.

"Well, uh...We didn't want Mike to know. That's his sister. Thanks for ruining it, Lucas!"

Sometimes, it's awesome that they're all nerds. It makes playing D&D amazing, AV club is a blast, and if you need to solve a problem, they're the party to call. But other times, like when you're trying to keep a secret, all your friends being intelligent nerds is a *curse*.

"Why are you lying?" Lucas demands.

"Why do you think I'm lying?" Dustin demands back.

"Will was way too freaked out up there for you two to be talking about kissing Nancy and—"

"It's his first kiss Lucas, he's allowed to be scared!"

"Dustin!" Will yells, mortified.

"What, I'm helping!"

Then, everyone's yelling at once. Mike is screaming about everyone wanting to kiss his sister, Dustin is persisting in his story, Will is trying to get Dustin to shut up, and Lucas is yelling about being lied to.

"Enough!" Mike shrieks louder than all of them. "Party rule number one! Friends don't lie! This is bullshit! We've had the best day in as long as we can remember and we're not going to ruin it with this! Friends. Don't. Lie. Dustin. What were you saying to Will?"

"Mike," Dustin says calmly, "I respect our party, and our rules. But I am sworn to secrecy on this one. It's not a *lie*. It's just *secret*."

Mike, knowing he was the first person that Will had ever told about his sexuality, is understandably confused by this.

"We don't have secrets."

Dustin rocks back and forth on his feet.

"Ehhh, we have a few secrets."

Through this entire exchange, Lucas is watching. Listening to Dustin and Mike, but watching Will. He's thrumming with nervous energy, fidgeting with his hands, taking them in and out of his pockets, running his fingers over his mouth, chewing on his thumb nail. All while keeping his big doe eyes on Mike. Only Mike, looking more and more concerned as realizes that his friends are keeping things from him after all that had happened. Will looks like he might cry. And then, it clicks.

"You weren't trying to get Will to kiss Nancy," Lucas says. "You were trying to get him to kiss *Mike*."

The basement falls into a heavy silence.

"I'm right, aren't I."

There's a snuffle from the corner, and everyone looks to see that Will has backed himself in between the couch and the wall, looking two seconds away from a panic attack. Dustin looks remorseful.

"I'm sorry, Will. I was just kidding. I took it way too far."

"So it's true then," Lucas's voice is too loud for the situation.

"Yeah, so what, Lucas?" Dustin says, moving to Will's side.

"What do you mean, *so what*? Were you making fun of him like everyone else does or is what they say actually true?"

It isn't until that moment that they collectively realize that Lucas isn't going to take this well.

"And if it is true?" Mike asks.

Lucas looks shocked.

"*What*? He wanted to *kiss* you, man! You're just okay with—with some—"

"Some what?" Mike steps into Lucas's space, a complete power move, daring him to finish.

Dustin can sense what's about to happen before it actually does, and he pulls Will into his arms and crouches on the floor with him, hoping that by making them smaller, it'll make him feel safe.

Lucas steps up too, until he and Mike are almost chest to chest.

"You're okay with some fucking queer being in our party?"

Mike doesn't have enough space to punch him, but he does have enough for a decent headbutt. It catches Lucas right in the nose, and blood immediately begins to pour.

"Ah! What the f—"

When he stumbles back is when Mike starts swinging. He doesn't care

where he hits, so his punches land everywhere; face, chest, stomach, arms. Lucas can't even retaliate. Mike doesn't think he's ever been this angry. And watching through his fingers in the space between his knee and Dustin's arm, Will doesn't think he's seen Mike this angry either.

"You piece of shit!" Mike's yelling.

Lucas gets a punch in, right across Mike's cheek which makes his mouth pool with blood. It doesn't even slow him down.

"If you were the one in the Upside Down and Will were here we would have found you twice as fast because we wouldn't have to put up with you being such a jackass!"

There are footsteps running upstairs.

"There is no party without Will. Do you hear me!?" The question had to have been rhetorical because there's no way for Lucas to answer with Mike's entire hand over his face as he tries to punch him in the stomach with the other one.

Nancy rips the door open from upstairs.

"Mike?! She yells, followed by the soft sound of her hurrying down.

"You're out!" Mike keeps screaming in Lucas's face, which is bloodied, but so is Mike's. "You're out of this fucking party! You have a problem with Will, you have a problem with all of us! Now get the fuck out!" he reaches out with one arm and grabs the D&D board, throwing the entire thing to the floor right as Nancy reaches the bottom of the stairs.

"Mike, what the hell!" Nancy is shocked.

Lucas is too. Everyone is.

"Lucas, are you okay?" the teenager asks.

"Don't ask that son of a bitch if he's okay, get him out!" Mike demands.

"Mike, that's your friend!"

"Not anymore!"

"Mike," Will, says from the corner. He's still huddled up with Dustin, shaking but trying not to show it. He tries to make his voice sound strong. "It's okay. Really. We can talk about this."

Mike is panting, and bleeding. His hair's disheveled and his shirt has a tear in it.

"Is that what you want, Will?"

Will nods.

"Yeah. It is."

After some first aid from Nancy and a promise from all of them to behave she reluctantly leaves them alone. It's fifteen minutes until Jonathan's pickup for Will.

They don't have much time, so Will does the only thing he can think to do.

He spills his guts.

He tells everyone in the room about his dad, how he and his mom fought and why he left. How he came to Mike in the middle of the night. How he came to tell Dustin. He tells them about stuff he never told anyone—things that happened when they weren't around. Troy shoving him lockers. Kids tripping him in the halls. Notes in his locker calling him a queer and a fag, telling him to kill himself, or that it was better when everyone thought he was dead. By the end, he's crying. Lately, it feels like all he does is cry. Though, it makes him feel better to see that all his friends look ready to cry too.

"Will, why didn't you say anything?" Dustin asks. "We could have done something."

"Like what?" Will asks. "Beat them up? You know that would never work. It never has. It never will."

"But we could tell someone, couldn't we?"

Will just stares at him like he's said the dumbest thing on Earth.

"Will!" Nancy's voice calls from upstairs. "Jonathan's here!"

"I'll see you guys later." Will gathers up his backpack but pauses beside Lucas's chair. "Bye, Lucas. I...I hope you think about things. I really like having you in the party." He doesn't know what to say after that, so he races up the stairs, Dustin screaming goodbye after him.

"Will, wait!"

Mike followed him up.

"I just...I wanted to say...I'm really sorry about how I handled all of that. I should have let you take care of it."

Will nods his head.

"Yeah," he laughs a little, "you probably should have."

"I just...I get so *mad*." He clenches his fists as he says this, as if even thinking of someone calling Will a slur is making him angry.

Will gently reaches out and pries Mike's fingers out of his palm before dropping his hand back to his side. He can hear his brother and Nancy talking by the front door.

"Hey, just...give Lucas a little time, okay. He might come around. People...they can change, right? It might have just been a shock. Things...they might work out."

Mike's face goes soft and he gives Will one of those stupid smiles that he loves so much.

"The world needs more people like you Will Byers."

His eyes drift upward, and he smiles even bigger.

"Hey, look," he points to the doorframe, "mistletoe."

Mike has to lean forward and down because Will's so much smaller than him, but when his lips touch his cheek, it's the last thing Will can think about. Actually, he can't think about much of anything at all; no fighting, no Lucas, no bullies, just how he wishes this moment could last forever.